



BALLADS IN THE SIXTH GRADE LITERATURE PROGRAM

Author(s): MABEL SNEDAKER

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THE BLUE KERCHIEF*

Old English Ballad

I SAW A SWEET MAIDEN trip over
the lea.
Her eyes were as loadstones attracting of
me;
Her cheeks were the roses, that Cupid
lurks in,
With a bonny blue kerchief tied under her
chin.

“Why wear you that kerchief tied over
your head?”
“ ’Tis the country girls’ fashion, kind sir,”
then she said.
“And the fashion young maidens will
always be in,
So I wear a blue kerchief tied under my
chin.”

“O where are you going, my fair pretty
maid?
O whither so swift through the dew
drops?” I said.
“I go to my mother, kind sir, for to spin.”
O the bonny blue kerchief tied under her
chin.

“Why wear a *blue* kerchief, sweet
maiden,” I said.
“Because the blue colour is one not to fade,
As a sailor’s blue jacket who fights for the
king,
So’s my bonny blue kerchief tied under the
chin.”

BALLADS IN THE SIXTH GRADE LITERATURE PROGRAM

MABEL SNEDAKER

University Elementary School, State University of Iowa

A BALLAD IS A SONG that tells a story. In the words of the old lady from whom Sir Walter Scott secured many ballads, “Ballads were made for singing and no’ for reading, but ye hae broken the charm now, and they’ll ne’er be sung mair.” It is through singing that ballads have lived.

The realization of the fact, that originally ballads were sung, should determine the procedure in presenting them as a part of any literature program. Those to which pleasing airs can not be found may be read and a few may be dramatized, but for the most part they should be sung. The singing of any poetry to which suitable music can be obtained adds to the children’s enjoyment of that poetry. Particularly is this true of ballads. Children

enjoy them not only because a ballad is a “song that tells a story” and tells it with straightforward simplicity, but also because ballads have pleasing tunes, tunes with a vitality that has carried them down through generations.

The study of ballads is one unit in the literature program of the sixth grade of the University Elementary School. The objective to be realized from this unit is to give the children such pleasure in reading and in singing ballads during the class period that they will want to read and to sing ballads for themselves. Although the study of the ballad as a type is taken up for the first time in the sixth grade, ballads are sung as a part of the music program throughout the grades. There is a ballad for every age and every mood. The themes range from slow laments, such as “Sir Patrick Spens,” and stirring tales of bat-

* Old English ballad of the broadside era, from Gould, S. B., and Sheppard, H. F., *Songs and Ballads of the West*.

tle, such as "Chevy Chase," to rollicking dances like "The Hal-an-Tow" and such nursery tales as "The Frog's Wooing." Adult judgment cannot be relied upon in predicting which of these themes will appeal to a given grade. This was shown clearly by a check of the most popular ballad in each grade. The ballad which the third grade liked best was not, "There was a Shepherd Maiden," nor any of the lively dance tunes which are the foundation of balladry, and which children of that age might be expected to like, but was "Sir Patrick Spens," a lament with slow and solemn measures.

The music program should give the children a taste of every type of ballad, of English and Scottish ballads, ballads of the broadside era, modern ballads, and American ballads, including cowboy songs, negro spirituals, songs of the southern mountains, and play-party games.

The method of presenting ballads as a literature unit is an informal one. Whenever possible they are sung. Sometimes the children supplement the singing by dancing the movements which originally accompanied the air. Such ballads as "Babylon" and "Get Up and Bar the Door" lend themselves well to dramatization and are favorites with the children. A surprisingly large number of ballads are memorized, although no memory work is required. The music aids in this. To be able to sing a poem not only adds to its enjoyment but also increases the ease with which it is learned and the length of time it will be remembered. It is no less true of our own time than of the days of the minstrel, that to set a poem to music "greatly recommends it to remembrance."

When music is not available the ballads are read to the group by the teacher. A few periods are provided during which individual children read to the class, ballads which they have discovered and enjoyed while browsing at the reading table. If a background is necessary to the enjoyment

of the ballad, this is presented by the teacher. Only such discussion and explanation as seems to heighten the appreciation of the reading is given. Since the work begins with ancient Scotch and English ballads, a brief explanation of the Scotch dialect should precede the reading. The children take great delight in this dialect which gives much less trouble than might be expected. Occasionally a few phrases such as, "My hand is in my husyfskap," whose meaning can not be inferred from the content, may be written on the board and explained before the reading begins. Sometimes the reading is interrupted by an eager, "What does that mean?" when an obscure Scotch phrase puzzles a listener.

Ballad characteristics such as the refrain, incremental repetition, parallel repetition, the commonplace, and dialogue, are explained as the children observe them while listening to the reading. During the first period in which ballads are read, children often call attention to such refrains as, "Eh vow bonnie," "Binnorie, O Binnorie!" "Down, a down, hay down, hay down." Later they enjoy reading *Hind Horn*, with one child reading the stanzas as did the minstrel, and the others joining in the refrain as did the listeners in the castle or on the village green. In a similar way, the children soon notice the repetition of lines and stanzas in ballads such as, "The twa Sisters," and comment upon the way in which this repetition builds up and heightens the dramatic tension of a situation. Commonplaces, such as "bluid-reid wine," "braid letter," "gars-green sleeve," never fail to attract attention as they occur over and over again in different ballads.

The historical background of the ballad is of great interest to children. The first setting needed is an account of what a ballad is and of how ballads originated. This includes the story of how the ballad originated as a dance song and of how it

later was separated from the dance and became the expression of communal life. It tells how the ballad was affected by individual poets who added to the old traditional songs, bit by bit, or changed them here and there, and yet were not poets in our sense of the word but merely singers of the people's songs.

The story of the origin of the ballad is followed by a discussion of ballad themes. Since these old ballads were ballads of the people, they are built around such themes as love, hate, revenge, sorrow for the dead, and superstitions. Some of the earliest are riddles, wit contests, and ballads of holy writ. Historical ballads were a late development.

The story of the minstrels who sang the ballads is especially interesting. How they were once hailed with delight both at the castle and on the village green, how they were rewarded with gifts and homage, how they were rightly regarded as artists of great skill who were able to play upon the delicate vielle; how the profession later was degraded until the minstrels became associated with bands of jugglers and tambourine players, and how, during the time of Queen Elizabeth, minstrels were restrained by law, together with other "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars"; all this is a most fascinating story to children.

Equally fascinating is the story of the decline of the ballad. With the invention of the printing press came the broadside. This was a ballad printed on one side of a small sheet of paper like a hand bill. Any popular happening might become the subject of a broadside, which, like our newspapers of today, often reflected popular criticism of the times. This is illustrated in the broadside, "Five Shillings a Week, a Complaint of low wages and the high cost of living." It is in this period, following the invention of the printing press that we

first meet with professional authors of ballads. The tawdry songs of these authors always pointed a moral, something which the early ballads never did. The result of this "ballad-mongering" was to cause the old ballads to be forgotten for a time.

A revival of interest in the ballad was due to the efforts of Bishop Percy, Sir Walter Scott and many other collectors. From nurses, shepherds, milkmaids, and other simple unlettered folk, the old songs were secured, and thus preserved to us.

No study of the ballad is complete without the story of balladry in America. This includes the Americanization of many of the old traditional melodies brought to America with the first settlers. It includes cowboy songs and songs of the southern mountaineer. The negro spirituals and the play-party games, both an offspring of everyday life, are closely related to balladry in America.

Children who have made a study of the ballad have shown their enjoyment and appreciation of its charm by the unusual amount of time spent at the reading table, by the numerous requests to take ballad books home, and by the writing of original ballads. Many children have asked their parents to buy as birthday gifts favorite books of ballads. Often a class has asked to share with the other grades of the school some of the pleasure which it has found in the ballads. To carry out this idea assembly programs have been planned. In preparing for these programs children decide upon and outline their talks during the oral composition period. On the morning of the assembly, the program is entirely in the hands of the children.

The result of the literature unit described in this article has been to arouse in children an unusual and abiding interest in ballads. In addition to this, it has stimulated a greater liking for other forms of poetry.

A MAY-DAY BALLAD PROGRAM

The Origin of May-day.

How May-day was celebrated in "Old England."

The story of May-day in ballads and folk songs.

Singing of ballads associated with early May-day games.

1. "The May-pole Dance."

Farnsworth. *Grammar School Songs*, p. 29.

Radcliffe - Whitehead. *Folk-Songs and Other Songs for Children* (Under title, "Come Lassies and Lads"). p. 2.

2. "Sellenger's Round."

A part of the group danced this old English dance while the others sang. The words and air used were those given on page 37 of Jackson, *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Centuries*. A description of the dance which was often a part of the celebration "in moonshine nights about May-poles," is found on page 39 of this book. A slightly different air with quite different words is given in Farnsworth, page 31, under the title, "Under the Greenwood Tree."

3. "The May-day Carol."

Gould and Sheppard. *Songs and Ballads of the West*. Part II, p. 46.

This melody is a very early one and rather ordinary, but the children enjoyed the ballad because of the story it tells of the quaint custom of "taking the May-bush in," a custom in which our present day practice of hanging May baskets probably had its origin.

The Elaboration of May-day Games Into a Pageant.

The part of Robin Hood and his associates in the pageant.

Singing of Robin Hood ballads associated with May-day pageants.

1. "Robin Hood, Robin Hood, said little John."

Farnsworth. *Grammar School Songs*; p. 28.

Jackson. *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Centuries*.

2. "The Hal-and-Tow," first stanza.

Gould and Sheppard. *Songs and Ballads of the West*. Part I, p. 50.

3. "Adam Bell, Clym of the Clough and William of Cloudesly."

Rimbault. *Musical Illustrations of Bishop Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*; p. 48.

This is a very popular old ballad from the Forest of Sherwood, King Henry IV granted to one Adam Bell, an annuity of £41 10s, issuing out of the fee farm of Clipston in the Forest of Sherwood. Adam Bell later violated his allegiance to the King and his rents were accounted for by the Sheriff of Nottinghamshire. The air is characteristic of the quaint minor strains of many old ballads.

The part of the milkmaids in the May-day pageant.

Singing of "The Merry Milkmaids."

Jackson. *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Centuries*; p. 42.

Late survivals of May-day festivities.

1. How May-day was celebrated in Cornwall.

2. The chimney sweeps' festival.

3. Singing of "The Cornish May Song."

Farnsworth. *Grammar School Songs*; p. 8. Jackson. *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Centuries*; p. 48.

Each song was announced by a child who gave a brief explanation of its source and its historical background. The data upon which the talks were based was obtained from Strutt, Joseph, *The Sports and Pastimes of the English People*. London. Methven & Co., 1801; and Stephenson, H. T., *The Elizabethan People*. N. Y. Holt, 1910.

A BALLAD PROGRAM

What a Ballad Is and How Ballads Originated.

Ballad themes and characteristics.

Reading and singing of ballads to illustrate themes and characteristics.

1. Reading of "Binnorie."

The version given in Bryant, *The Best English and Scottish Ballads*, p. 36.

2. Singing of "There Were Three Ravens."

One of the oldest extant ballads. Jackson, *English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th centuries*, p. 24.

The Minstrels.

The Decline of the Ballad, the Broadside.

Singing, reading and dramatization of late ballads and of broadsides.

1. Singing of "The Widdecoombe Fair."

Gould and Sheppard. *Songs and Ballads of the West*. Part I, p. 34.

2. Singing of "In Winter When the Rain Rain'd Cauld."

Lampe. *Songs of Scotland*, p. 41.

3. Dramatization of "Get Up and Bar the Door."

Planned from the version in Stempel, *A Book of Ballads*.

4. Reading of excerpts from broadsides in *The Shirburn Book of Ballads*.

a. "Good people all, repent with speed."

b. "All careful Christians, mark my song."

c. "The miller in his best array."

How Ballads Were Saved for Us.

1. Bishop Percy's collection.

Singing of ballads from Rimbault.

Musical Illustrations of Bishop Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, p. 48.

a. "John Anderson, my Jo."

A lovely minor air, words and melody very different from the well-known song.

2. The work of Sir Walter Scott.

Comparison of excerpts from "Sir Lochinvar" and the old ballad "Katherine Janfarie." (Stempel, p. 67.)

Ballad Making in America.

Singing and reading of American ballads and related folk-lore.

1. Cowboy ballads.

a. Reading of "The Zebra Dun." Stempel, *A Book of Ballads*, p. 149.

b. Singing of "The Old Chisholm Trail."

Stempel, *A Book of Ballads*, p. 145.

2. Songs from the southern mountains.

"Sourwood Mountain."

3. Negro Spirituals.

"I Want To Be Like Jesus In My Heart."

"I Know The Lord's Laid His Hands On Me."

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Rodeheaver, *Plantation Melodies*. Krehbiel, *Afro-American Folk-Songs*.

4. The Play-party Game.

Playing of "Captain Jenks."

Piper, *Some Play-party Games of the Middle West*.

How Modern Ballads Differ From Popular Ballads.

Reading and singing of modern ballads.

1. Reading of "The Highwayman," Alfred Noyes.

Stempel, *A Book of Ballads*, p. 187.

2. Singing of "Mary of Argyle."

Lampe, *Songs of Scotland*, p. 37.

Books in which you can find these ballads and many others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTE: The purpose of this bibliography is not to give an extensive list of sources, but to note a few of the books which the teacher will find most usable.

Bryant, E. A.—*The Best English and Scottish Ballads*. N. Y. Crowell.

Childs, F. J.—*English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. (5 vols.) N. Y. Houghton. 1904.

Too expensive for the ordinary school library, but the most reliable source book.

Clark, A.—*Shirburn Book of Ballads*. Oxford. 1907.

Contains interesting examples of the broadside.

Gummere, F. B.—*The Popular Ballad*. N. Y. Houghton. 1907.

The best book for the teacher's preparation; deals with ballad characteristics, history, etc.

Gummere, F. B.—*Warner's Library of the World's Best Literature*. Vol. III; pp. 1305-7.

Brief usable treatment of the popular ballad.

Lomax, J. A.—*Cowboy Songs*. Sturges & Walton.

Piper, E. F.—*Some Play-party Games of the Middle West*. (Pamphlet.) Published in *American Journal of Folklore*, 28; 262.

Quiller-Couch, A. T.—*Oxford Book of Ballads*. Oxford. 1910.

The most complete edition at a moderate price.

Stempel, G. H.—*A Book of Ballads*. N. Y. Henry Holt. 1917.

Probably the best single book to put into the hands of children. Contains excellent notes and helps for the teacher.

Elson, W. H., Greenlaw, E., Keck, C. M.—*Junior High School Literature*. Book III. N. Y. Scott, Foresman. 1922.

A very clear and readable discussion of the ballad.

Books from which the music for ballads may be obtained:

Farnsworth, C. H.—*Grammar School Songs*. Scribner's. N. Y. 1917.

Gould, S. B., and Sheppard, H. F.—*Songs and Ballads of the West*. London. Patey and Willis.

Jackson, Vincent.—*English Melodies from the 13th to the 18th Centuries*. London. M. Dent. 1910.

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Radcliffe-Whitehead, J. B.—*Folk-songs and Other Songs for Children*. N. Y. Oliver Ditson. 1903.

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Rodeheaver, H.—*Plantation Melodies*. Rodeheaver Co.

A BLIND BOY'S SONG

Arthur N. Thomas

WHEN E'ER I blow my horn I see
A bridge of dazzling light,
Where dancing as in glee
Are colors bright.

I do not like to grope or play
Where others come and go,
I'd rather steal away
And blow, blow, blow.

Sometimes I take my horn, at night,
And to the attic creep
To watch the streams of light
Until I sleep.